Buran

By Whatimleavingbehind

Rain embraced Rachel as long as it could before falling away from her, streaming from her toes into the tall grass brushing them. Rain poured from beneath Bratishka, the fur nearer the earth letting it down softer, gentler.

"Lost Jellyfish" Rachel thought, through the age of her mind. She stared at the top of the staircase. Looking back at her was a Blue. Behind it, the lantern owl was turning to show its belly. In a flash, they were both gone.

A moment later they both appeared again. Did it again. And again.

The Blue kept staring back at Rachel, who was wearing only cutoff shorts, a sable fur hat, and her Snowstone pendant.

"I know. He’s gone."

Rachel knew they had felt Kageyama pass through the tension in the field. And she knew, in their own way, like with the bears, the Blue being here meant something. She didn't know what, reliving or replaying Kageyama bringing them into the craft for some reason. Rachel wondered where Kageyama was now. She remembered how she had felt, like an insect under a rock being turned over. The certainty behind Rachel's thoughts and the severity of it spoke clearly "If you ever take Silas, I will kill you."

The trees applauded in waves like an asteroid hitting the ocean.

Rachel would understand through time they were not all local.

Thousands of great Ravens appeared around the Blue, wide wings painting the dark gray sky into a darker secret. All at once they spoke, or tried to, calling: "You."

The sound they made, the frequency and vibration of it, had an effect on the Blue standing there looking down at Rachel. In a split second the Blue glowed slightly, like a bolt of lightning, and in that same instant the mother bear Rachel had watched kill Silas dropped from a height like her own, landing hard.

The ravens. Their cries. The hard landing, not much farther than a stone’s throw away.

Rachel’s pupils dilated. She turned Bratishka so hard, while calling the other horses, that some of his mane ripped free. Hundreds of hooves could be heard at varying distances. Her call was harsh,

one they had never heard before. Their mother was in peril. Only a few were truly close, but that was enough.

One Yakutian ahead of Rachel was just beginning to meet them when the bear caught up. All at once Rachel said, "Wait," while yanking down, standing up, and leaping from one horse to the other.

Bratishka understood immediately. He stopped almost dead the moment she left him. When she turned back, she saw him thrown to the ground, then rise and kick.

She knew.

The second time she looked back, riding toward Silas, Bratishka wasn't moving. But the mother bear was being thrown back and forth by the kicks of the Yakutians surrounding her. She hopped off the horse, went inside, and grabbed her shashka, a couple of large bags, and a skinning knife.

Silas had watched her in silence. A few minutes later he put on his coat and sable hat and followed her, walking slowly.

He took his time.

When he sensed the right moment, he delicately wiped her face with his palms, slicking the blood away as she cut and ripped the coat from the bear. Then she cut away the meat, throwing the chunks into the bags. He gently squeezed her shoulder. She turned to look at him, and he kissed her. Only when she saw the blood on his lips did hers start trembling, and it all became real.

He picked up the bags of meat when it was time and brought them back to the freezer. Returning with two shovels, he began to dig as she said her last goodbyes, running her hand over his mane, over the fur, over the mangled neck, again and again.

They buried Bratishka.

Before sleep found Silas that night, he made a special order for Rachel. He always knew what she needed. But this, this order would take months.

One sunny day, when the breeze carried the smell of pine through the mansion, a knock came.

Silas's warm smile put her mind at ease.

“I ordered something for you that night Bratishka died.”

Rachel looked adorable as Silas beckoned her outside, opening the door. He wanted her to see it in the sunlight. He had been waiting for this.

“You haven’t even seen it yet,” he said, chuckling.

Her eyes were misty. Rachel smiled.

The box was huge. Truly huge.

“Look,” he said.

He showed her a cello song. Then another, showing the basics of how to play one. He could see it in her eyes as she took it all in. Rachel liked cello.

After the video was done, he took out a pocket knife and handed it to her, then sat down on the ground to watch her open the box.

It was packaged very well. She took her time.

As she lifted out the all-black cello, her eyes blazed with love. Even the strings were black from a special coating. Even the bow used black hair.

“Volcanic black like your eyes,” Silas said, his own dancing.

The cello was worth a fortune.

Silas and Rachel rarely spent any of the money Kageyama had left them. Usually no more than a few hundred a month on food. Silas had contacted the most respected cello maker on earth and gotten a quote for the idea.

It was under a million.

He gave him ten.

Along with the note:

“A gust of wind vibrating the strings should sound like a great master playing.”

It had an unusual form. Elongated, with a barrel chest that brought to mind a rare beetle.

Within the hour Rachel had started to learn to speak through it.

Within a year they would often have picnics at the top of the jade staircase. After, the cello would bring all the horses.

It was a sight.

All of them packed shoulder to shoulder for as long as she would play.

She loved it.

We all did.

Rachel never really played songs. She only talked through it. Rachel spoke clearly. Sometimes she would tell Silas they would be making love soon. Other days she would tell him her name wasn’t Rachel today. It was "Weasel Ears".

One warm but cloudy day, while Silas worked on his Stone Book project, engraving all their favorite memories from throughout the years in hard stone, from making love to the Lantern Owl, Rachel stood over Bratishka’s grave.

Two things became law in her mind. The time had passed. She was ready for Silas to make the gravestone he had offered to, and those two bears that she had watched kill her, the Rachel of memory, had to die.

Rachel and Silas were Tigers in spirit. Every meal was one on one, a fight to the death.

She rode around the entire property looking for them. She felt three others were enough. Not the biggest, but the strongest in spirit. Bratishka had been the most loyal of them all. Yakutians were not docile as some thought, but like Rachel, tougher than most minds could hold.

She saw them clearly through the age of her mind as she rode.

She stopped.

"Of course," she said aloud.

Kageyama had done it right. He had brought many lines of Yakutian horses here, aside from the descendants of Rachel’s.

Probably one of the tallest in the sanctuary, just like her. Only a few inches taller than others, but his narrower ribs gave him a distinguished presence. Not unheard of, but striking. His coat was dusty gray and cream. She could see in his eyes he was fast.

"Buran!" Rachel said, through the age of her mind, while making eye contact.

She quickly started circling him on her horse. Faster and faster. Buran’s eyes moved very slowly, watching hers. That was good. She kept circling Buran, replaying Bratishka and the bear over and over in her mind, until she knew he could see it too.

Only then did she know she didn’t need three more. She would only ride him.

Although she would never know it, one or two of those wolves they would find every so often, stomped flat by the herd, had only met Buran.

Leggier, though still stocky. One day Silas would liken him to an American bulldog. They looked like a faster mastiff type breed and had the personality of a Yakutian.

Buran always came to hear Rachel play cello. All the horses loved Rachel. Buran though, taller, sleeker, unusually alert, was drawn in body and mind to constant patrols. Constant movement. More active than all the other horses here. And about a hundred pounds more muscle, she thought.

In the following weeks she rode Buran more and more. Gradually, she had to wait less and less for him to come when she called. She trained him to kick too, by pulling straight up on his mane. Until she could make him do it repeatedly.

The night before she left, looking up at Silas in the shower, she thought of her coming absence.

She knew no one had ever understood him.

But she did.

He would meet people on their level. Something he was taught by his mother. Something his mother had learned not from being enlisted, but from officer training. Or maybe from the Naval War College.

Never speak from underneath. Never say I'm sorry. Never ask permission. Mirror them, moving with the current. Keep all your cards close to your chest, so when you need to lay them down they never know a battle has even begun.

That was how to survive.

She knew she didn't need his permission. She didn't need to tell him.

By the afternoon on the day she left, the gravestone she had ordered would arrive, just as she planned, Bratishka written with thick pencil on the window, cut at an angle for the engraving. The rock, like her pendant, she chose a large snowstone.

She knew she would come back, whenever that time was, and see the gravestone finished in its place above his grave, and find Silas deep in the ghost world from her absence, somewhere in the mansion, probably the shower.

The longer he was alone, the deeper he went.

He had not taken lithium since he arrived all those years ago. Another secret of his. Another reason he left.

He had taken it from a very young age, for decades. It had been like a miracle drug to him. But he had taken it so long it had become toxic. He had to stop it cold.

He had said once he didn't want to be seen or recorded acting strange, or made a fool of. He didn't want that on the internet, or to end up in jail or a mental hospital.

Rachel had never known the person everyone in America had.

Only the free Silas.

The one she loved.

She would leave her Snowstone pendant by the coffee pot. He would look at every piece in the display room until he found the missing one, and he would know.

Sometimes words didn’t hold enough weight.

"Bratishka" would be missing.

Only the head, neck, and part of the shoulder of Bratishka. That was the pendant. The neck curled at an angle from the shoulder in a way that resembled a fish flopping out of water. The impact of the bear. His sacrifice. His life for hers.

And he would find a shotgun and a slug bandolier missing near the front door.

They didn’t need words.

Rachel left early, bringing only the shotgun, the slug bandolier, skinning and carving knives, rope for the hide, and enough food for her and Buran for a couple of weeks, packed in thick leather bags slung across his back on a wide leather pack band.

Great Ravens called, "You," as she made her way on Buran, slowly, to the gate. It was windy. She paused outside the front gate, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath through her nostrils, pulling in all her favorite smells of the forest. Listening to the leaves applauding.

The two cubs, if you could call them cubs, the ones she had watched kill the Rachel of memory. Their time was up.

She needed to overcome this. To process it, she thought. They would not be dropped out of thin air like the Mama. Even if her shotgun, which never jammed, did. Buran would kill the bear. She was certain.

She opened her eyes and rode hard.

Rachel had loved Bratishka almost as much as the old horse.

As she rode, she started laughing, tears streaming down her face. Flocks of great Ravens far ahead of her steered her until nightfall. The faint sounds of hundreds of them calling out, "You."

It only took a few days of riding to find the first bear.

She stopped far away from it, in a clearing of mostly tall grass that whispered like millions of little blades being sharpened, gossiping about the death they could see coming. She took the pack off Buran. Then they both ate.

After letting the food settle and regaining strength from resting, she climbed back onto Buran. The memory of Bratishka stayed clear the entire ride for both of them.

They didn’t charge. They arrived slowly. Like poison entering the bloodstream.

When they got close, she pulled straight up, hard, on Buran’s mane a few times, then dismounted. She got her shotgun ready. She smacked his hindquarters, ushering him toward the bear, as she walked slowly, not far from his side.

Neither Rachel nor Buran noticed, or even remembered, any sounds the bear made. They were too focused for that. It happened in their minds in silence.

Rachel was smiling, remembering Kageyama saying truth is stranger than fiction, as she watched her "docile" Yakutian horse, the one she had trained to kill bears through the age of her mind, circle the bear just as she had when they first met, kicking it over and over, too fast to be caught by its explosive lunges.

Buran was quicker. And colder.

Until one strike to the head made the bear go limp.

Rachel walked over and shot the bear a couple of times in the head with slugs. Then skinned it. Rachel took her time throwing chunks of meat in every direction for the great Ravens that had helped her.

Not long after, the ravens led her to the second bear.

Buran killed him faster. Now he was trained.

As Rachel stepped back inside, Silas was pacing in the kitchen next to a beautiful meal that smelled as if it had been sitting there for at least a couple of days. Rachel didn’t mind she smelled

like blood. He was repeatedly pointing aggressively down at the ground.

Rachel walked up slowly. She didn't speak.

In the same instant, her hand reached down his pants, holding him, and her lips met his.

Her hand never let go while she walked him to the shower.

Rachel made coffee right as the sun began to rise, and with the birds her cello started speaking.

Silas had risen following the sound and the smell of a fresh cup waiting for him.

He sat down in the kitchen looking over at her.

Rachel was on a stool, wearing nothing, her back to him, staring out the window, her long legs spread apart.

Rachel spoke clearly.

Very slow, at first.

He understood enough already. Why she had left. Which pendant she had chosen to wear. The Blue had dropped the Mother. It had taken her Bratishka. The Mama had killed him, the Silas of memory.

She couldn't bear it anymore.

The thought of it happening again. Who else might get hurt. The missing shotgun told him enough. The mother bear had not been alone that day.

I know Rachel.

The two cubs.

The vibrations from the cello now grew deeper. He felt it in his chest. In his throat, almost a tickle.

His vision went black for a moment. His whole face felt as if someone had thrown a satin sheet over his head and let it slick off slowly.

Before his vision returned he heard, "Do you," spoken with a wet rolling clucking croak, as a slight gust of air cooled his face.

On the counter next to his coffee stood a great Raven, its large black claws beside the cup.

Its face was level with his own.

He stared back into the little black eyes, the head tilting, shifting, searching his own.

Rachel was speaking loudly.

Something dark. Fast. Powerful. Terrifying was moving through her playing.

He took a long drink from his coffee to help the tickle the cello had raised in his throat, which had grown deeper still.

"Do you?" the great Raven said again.

His eyes left the bird and moved back to Rachel.

His eyes misted. His lips pursed in an instant.

"Oh my God," he said, both aloud and through the age of his mind.

He heard Rachel expel a sound between a gasp and a cough. A sound trying to hold back tears.

The entire room had filled with great Ravens. A few hundred of them, maybe.

All their eyes were pointed right at her.

Then the flash came.

Her following them to the bear.

Buran, her new hunting horse.

Feeding them all bear meat, covered in blood.

I see.

He tiptoed through all the birds.

Rachel kept playing.

He pressed his cheek flush to hers as she played.

Then kissed all over her head.

Tears streamed down her face.

It was new. That was all.

He whispered it to her.

Then louder.

"Let’s train them not to be inside too much, ok?"

Rachel chirped out a laugh.

In an instant they were all gone.

"Let’s walk," Silas said gently, taking her hand in his.

The silence after they were gone followed them down like something still watching.

They both wore nothing at all, each holding a cup, sipping the steaming coffee as they made their way down for Rachel to get her first look at Bratishka’s new gravestone.

Cradled like an engagement ring displayed on dark green velvet, it rested there.

Big enough to never be forgotten.

Engraved deep enough to never be lost.

A great Snowstone.

So out of place among the lush greens around it, it resembled a creature curled in a ball, about to rise at any moment.

Not dangerous. Not venomous. But known somehow.

A strange comforting feeling.

As if Siberia itself had decided to lay Bratishka at rest.

As the day grew darker it drew them back inside from the horses and the grass beneath their feet.

Back to their cave.

Their room.

Rachel rested her head on Silas’s chest and spoke with a quiet nervousness.

"Could we buy a pill for Buran?"

Silas smiled in the dark room, their cave, the two of them tucked there like salamanders under stone, his chest rising and falling a couple of times in a silent chuckle.

"That might be the coolest idea you ever had," he said, with a smile in his voice.

He knew she was smiling wide as her arms tightened around him.

She wasn’t asking his permission.

She was asking if a pill could work on a horse.

Her arms loosened.

She rose fast.

Excited.

Within seconds a small light appeared and floated back to him. She had turned on her phone.

It was Silas's job to make sure they were always charged.

One of the few things he never told Rachel, one of his secrets, was that those rare times he saw that phone in her hand, he felt as if she were committing infidelity somehow.

It made his chest turn into knots.

Silas gently took the phone from her. Her fingers slid in a single motion to rest on the thick muscle of his forearm.

She would rather watch him do it anyway.

He knew it.

He scrolled down to Pill listed in contacts.

He quickly turned the screen of the phone and looked at Rachel.

It lit her face. Her big smile. Her long even teeth.

He only wanted to look at her.

His eyes kept glancing back at her lovely smile as he typed very slowly.

Too slowly.

"Could a fully grown Yakutian horse handle taking a pill? Same effect it had on us? How much?"

Rachel had been pushing gently for him to go faster. Her brow had furrowed, but the smile never left her.

She knew.

She loved him for it.

They had all the time in the world.

A few minutes later they got a message back.

"Works on all mammals. We saw Rachel with the birds. We will give you one if she can do anything on camera. Anything. For research."

For a moment neither of them moved.

They both knew Kageyama had the property blocked from view.

Electronic warfare.

They knew only outside the property was monitored by these people.

They knew nobody got into that phone without belonging to Kageyama’s inner circle. He trusted them completely. That meant only one thing. Japan.

They knew they were honorable.

"Agreed. Yes. She can. Only Rhames," Silas replied.

Less than a minute later the phone received another message.

"Not possible. Rhames isn’t cleared. Above Blue tech. Strongly reconsider."

They looked at one another, deciding.

They knew whoever was on the other end of the phone could be trusted with their lives.

They were certain of that.

"Who?" Rachel said.

Silas typed:

"Who?"

A moment later the next message read:

"Me."

They looked at each other.

The chill air in the jade room felt colder.

The hairs on both their arms rose.

Their blank faces stayed on each other.

It was her special horse.

Her hunting horse.

Her choice.

She nodded.

"Ok. When" he sent.

A reply came almost immediately.

"Up to you."

Rachel spoke excitedly while getting up to dress.

"Now."

She said it with no hesitation at all.

Silas got up, getting dressed while typing:

"Now would be perfect."

No response came.

They knew.

With his clearance, he had a reversed craft. Or access to one.

Rachel made tea and coffee as they waited in the kitchen.

Not ten minutes had passed when a flash came.

A few moments later, a knock.

Just one.

Silas opened the door.

A man of no great height, but slender, with gray hair, stood in front of him.

He bowed.

They returned it.

His suit was made of the darkest black they had ever seen, and he wore a turtleneck of the same shade.

They welcomed him in.

The man slipped off his shoes by the door.

"Coffee?" Rachel asked sweetly as they walked in.

"Tea," the man replied, smelling it already in the air.

As they sat at the jade table in the kitchen, when they had settled into their seats, they saw his eyes.

His eyes spoke clearly.

They looked almost as trustworthy as Kageyama’s.

But darker.

This man had killed.

Kageyama had killed too, but this man had done it for more reasons than one.

The man bowed his head faintly again, as if reading their thoughts, right before taking a sip of his tea.

He never introduced himself.

That, too, felt correct.

They weren’t surprised.

He then spoke with a surprisingly deep voice, which carried no accent.

This impressed both of them.

His eyes were like the shells of black beetles, with that same life behind them in flight. The rapid movement of their wings. Hundreds of thoughts on his mind at once. All of them precise. Then the slow hover before landing. The razor-sharp legs digging into the wood of a tree. The beetle landed.

"I am one of the measures Kageyama put in place against those who would kill you," he said with a strange comforting tone.

Rachel and Silas glanced at each other.

"I run the facility," he said before taking another sip of his tea.

"The pills are costly. I cannot afford them. Kageyama bought me two just before he died. To protect you."

He paused before speaking again.

"I do not regret it. Would you like to call your horse now, Rachel?"

Rachel was so happy she looked almost as if she were dancing to the door.

She opened it and called for Buran.

The visitor kept drinking his tea until Rachel looked back at them, her face glowing. Buran was close.

They both rose without hurry and made their way over.

The smell of pine rose with every step as they approached.

They could see him in the distance as they stopped just before the threshold.

"Buran!" Rachel called again, affectionately.

They could not see the horse break into motion. It was too dark for that.

Only in an instant his shape seemed to double.

Then within a few breaths his hooves were close.

Then he was there.

When Buran arrived, they saw why Kageyama had trusted this man.

The visitor’s eyes widened.

Then he smiled.

They had not expected that.

They remembered Kageyama’s laughter and imagined this man might have seen that side of Kageyama too.

Not many had.

They were sure of that.

"Remarkable," the visitor said quietly, drawing a small case from his pocket.

He opened it and held it out for Rachel to take the pill and give it to Buran.

She quickly placed the pill as far down his throat as she could reach, then held his mouth closed until he swallowed.

Afterward she checked until she was sure it had gone down. It had.

Rachel rubbed Buran’s neck and sent him off with a soft touch.

The visitor kept his eyes on the horse a moment longer before stepping in after them.

Rachel sat on the stool.

They returned to the table.

"It’s easiest for her when playing cello," Silas said without turning, while the visitor pulled out his phone to record.

Rachel began like a storm. Lightning. Thunder inside an avalanche.

Unstoppable.

Goosebumps ripped through the room, as if they were exposed to something chemical, something speaking through nature. Not asking permission. They were being told.

Rachel was happy.

The room was enveloped in the cello’s vibrations.

She played faster and faster.

The visitor heard small clicks coming toward him and turned.

A great Raven was walking slowly toward him from across the jade table, its head making sudden tilting, shifting movements, saying "You" in its wet rolling clucking croak.

It spoke again when it stopped walking, its claws now still.

"You," it said, its little black eyes searching his, hopping right and left, then stealing some of his tea with a dart of its beak before flying to Rachel.

The great Raven landed on Rachel’s head, making her giggle while she played sounds from her cello that could make even the visitor’s eyes mist.

And like before, the room seemed to explode.

A few more this time, Silas thought.

The visitor stood, though he might not have realized it.

He did not walk over.

He had stood.

That was all.

As they all called "You" a few times after arriving, some appeared on the jade floor. Others arrived already in the air.

At once the room turned black with wings, and alive with hundreds of shifting and landing claws.

Silas was surprised to hear Rachel try something this time.

"YOU," she yelled, her voice holding back brave tears.

Every great Raven lifted from the jade floor toward them, wings beating.

They were enveloped in small gusts from their wings while hundreds of close wet rolling clucking croaks repeatedly said "You" until Silas told Rachel through the age of his mind it was time.

It was enough.

They left.

He stopped the recording.

Rachel came back to her seat at the table.

A few minutes passed in silence.

They let him process.

It was the visitor who spoke first.

"Is it true your favorite faceted gem is a 10 millimeter pigeon blood ruby?" he asked.

"That’s correct," Silas replied.

The visitor took out a small black satin bag with a drawstring and loosened it.

Rachel and Silas saw through the age of their minds something that made them smile.

Kageyama appeared a little drunk, laughing with the visitor, staring out at the ocean from the shore, sharing a bottle of sake.

With his grandson.

Their eyes snapped to him.

He bowed his head low, and for a long time.

Then he said, "Masanori Kageyama," while emptying the small satin bag onto the jade table.

Just under two dozen loose 10 millimeter Portuguese-cut pigeon blood rubies slid out across the jade table, their pinkish-red glow with blue undertones caught in the kitchen light.

The meaning of them hit before the memory did.

They saw it in another flash.

Masanori in an office, smoking a cigar, looking at a screen. Satellite feed.

Not a minute later he was inside a lantern owl.

Another instant later he had brought himself down from the craft a foot behind someone in a facility and thrust a short blade into the man’s back, into the lung, then drew it deep across the man’s neck.

Not a moment later Masanori was back in his office at the facility, picking up his cigar, puffing it back to full ember while pouring himself a glass of sake.

This was not even a few months ago.

Somehow, they knew.

While Masanori made his way to the door they expressed their gratitude for his visit.

Right before leaving he spoke.

"It was an honor to meet you."

Then he bowed and left.

They slowly walked back to the table to look at the rubies.

They knew.

Each ruby was a life he had taken to protect them.

Rubies. Value. Cost.

Of course.

A respectful way to say your lives come with a price.